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## The Mexico That Spain Encountered

SUSAN SCHROEDER

**I**magine the pleasure experienced by the Spaniards reconnoitering the waters between Honduras and the Yucatan (Yucatán) Peninsula in 1502 upon finally sighting a Maya trading vessel loaded with cargo. The vessel, called a *canoa*, or canoe (a term borrowed by the Spaniards from Caribbean Island Arawak natives), was transporting finely woven cloth, pottery, metalware, weapons, cacao, and probably female slaves for sale or exchange with coastal Yucatan populations. Such canoes, sometimes 40 feet in length and capable of accommodating huge loads and many passengers, were a primary means of transportation for numerous native peoples in the Americas and provided but one clue for the Spaniards as to indigenous technology. Even more impressive, however, was the handsomely outfitted Maya official at the helm and a number of slaves, bound together with cord around their necks, who manned the paddles that propelled the boat. Other Mayas along the shore gathered to watch and try to make sense of the strange Spanish ships. Later they would furnish the newcomers with food; water; fodder for the horses, pigs, and chickens the Spaniards had on board; and other items that the Spaniards demanded, at least for a while. However, this initial encounter with the Mayas was indicative enough of both the wealth and the sophistication of local societies to warrant further Spanish exploration and penetration of the mainland.

The Spaniards' later reports of their early experiences with the Mayas of Yucatan were encouraging, for most often they were desperate for the natives' hospitality while dazzled by the coastal Mayas' "towers," or stone-hewn temples and palaces at places such as Tulum, a major trade entrepôt (trading outpost) at the time. They had little way of determining for certain, however, the existence of additional highly advanced societies located farther inland or the extraordinary terrain that they inhabited.

The Yucatan Peninsula is a flat limestone shelf extending into the Caribbean Sea. With shallow topsoil, insubstantial vegetation, and little in the way of reliable freshwater sources, the peninsula is a stark contrast to its base, which projects into extensive rain forest and wetlands. Here potentially rich soils have their nutrients continuously leached out by heavy rainfall. Beyond this region, in the highlands of what is today Guatemala, the land is distinguished by high and often active volcanoes, large lakes, and fertile but rugged alluvial plains created where runoff water has deposited soil from the mountainsides. Occupied for centuries by linguistically diverse Maya populations whose territory encompassed approximately 400,000 square kilometers (155,000 square miles) extending from the southeastern state of Tabasco to western El Salvador, this challenging topography was nonetheless conducive to the development of one of the most extraordinary civilizations in all the Americas.

Indeed, Mexico's spectacular landscape (as claimed for the Spanish Crown) extended as far north as the upper reaches of California and New Mexico and south to Costa Rica's borders. Millions of indigenous people had either traversed or settled in prime regions of this vast territory since their first migrations from Eurasia perhaps 40,000 years before. These earliest natives, representing only five linguistic phyla, diversified and settled as distinct culture groups in thousands of different locations. Just one example of the complexity of local social and environmental adaptations is California, where abundant marine, forest, and river-plain resources resulted in indigenous culture enclaves representing some 120 divergent languages.

For present purposes, though, we are concerned with the natives who lived within or near the boundaries of modern Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. Most familiar are the extraordinary accomplishments of the classic Mayas (about A.D. 250 to 900 or 1000) in tropical and highland Guatemala and the Aztecs (about A.D. 1428–1521) in central Mexico. Both civilizations developed and flourished, for the most part, in close proximity to fertile volcanic alluvial soils, woodlands, and large dependable lakes and rivers, with food supplies augmented by raised-field agriculture in wetlands areas. The Aztecs were especially well known for what may have been a similar form of raised-field agriculture, called *chinampa*, which is discussed below. It is in these regions that dietary basics such as corn, beans, squashes, and chiles grew in profusion. With only the turkey, the bee, and small dogs as domesticated animals, the natural flora and fauna, as hunted and gathered, supplemented nutritional and other domestic needs. Deer, mountain lions, peccaries, hares, fowl, iguanas and other reptiles, and insects abounded, along with a full spectrum of edible fruits and vegetables. Even lake scum was harvested, cooked, and eaten for its nourishment.

Although marked by sharp ethnic differences as well as differences in their sociopolitical organization, both zones supported densely populated settlements with, by proportion, increasingly thinning populations the greater the distance from the two centers. In Mexico, with fewer lakes and rivers in the north and south, the terrain becomes progressively rugged and arid. Broad flatlands of cactus,

scrub, and scant grasses are cut by stark sierras. Rainfall in the northern reaches is seasonal at best. Correspondingly, the native populations tended to be sparse and, with the exception of the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico and Arizona, only semi-sedentary in nature. Seasonal hunting and gathering typically supplied the necessary food. A notable exception was the Zapotec- and Mixtec-speaking peoples in south-central Mexico who, like the Aztecs and Mayas, established impressive political centers in the valleys of their own seemingly limitless mountain ranges. Nevertheless, in spite of great geographic, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, most indigenous societies shared many common cultural characteristics in terms of diet and intellectual and technological achievements. To distinguish these remarkable peoples from other native groups in North America, anthropologist Paul Kirchhoff proposed in the early 1940s that the region as well as the societies and cultures within it be designated "Mesoamerica" (see Table 1, page 76, for a general chronology of Mesoamerican culture epochs).

Yet all the reliable evidence indicates that each of these major centers, their linguistic and ethnic differences notwithstanding, could likely trace many key characteristics of their societies to a common cultural ancestor and locale along the wet, lowland Gulf Coast region of Veracruz. Known today as the Olmec (in Nahuatl, the Aztecs' language: "people of the place with rubber [*olli*"]') heartland, its inhabitants warrant recognition for establishing what traditionally has been described as the mother civilization of Mesoamerica.

In addition to having a sociopolitical system that channeled at least part of its energies into developments such as monumental architecture, fine art, and esoteric religious concepts, the Olmecs contributed a practice of profound importance to later generations—the practice of employing graphic symbolic forms to convey a unified construct of their worldview, aesthetics, and concept of kingship. Subsequently, over the centuries historical writing expressed by means of pictographs, hieroglyphs, and portraiture in books, stone, bone, wood, and ceramics was institutionalized by Maya, Zapotec, and Aztec rulers to exalt and validate royal authority.

Settled around 1500 A.D., probably by speakers of the ancestral Mixe-Zoquean linguistic group, the two best-known sites where the Olmecs flourished were San Lorenzo (about 1200–900 B.C.) and La Venta (about 900–400 B.C.), which functioned as political, religious, and economic centers. There earthen pyramids and numerous platform mounds and altars were built as part of administrative and ceremonial complexes, with stelae, large stone pillars, carved in low relief to commemorate what are believed to be authoritative individuals and their activities. However, there was far more to Olmec culture than a few ceremonial centers, for strategic regional settlements played key roles in territorial integration and overall development. Ongoing archaeological excavations indicate greater diversity as well as sophistication among the various Olmec people than heretofore thought.

Rubber, a natural resource in the Veracruz area, had many uses, one of the most important being the manufacture of rubber balls. Such balls trace back at

worldview through language

least to 1200 B.C. at El Manatí, Veracruz, where they were included in out-of-the-way caches as ritual offerings. Later the Olmecs exported them by the thousands. At distant Olmec-influenced Izapa, south toward the Pacific coast of the state of Chiapas, there is evidence of the earliest Mesoamerican ball game. But the sport was soon ubiquitous. Subsequently, rules, equipment, and the architectural playing fields for ball games varied according to the indigenous peoples who played them. Archaeological evidence for the existence of ball courts is found throughout Mesoamerica and beyond, in Puerto Rico as well as in Arizona.

The ball courts were large and impressive, with daunting stone walls. Typically, they were built adjacent to civic or religious facilities and were used by rulers on occasions of high ceremony. At least three different kinds of ball games were played. From oral histories it is certain that wagers could be costly and contests brutal, with defeated players suffering harsh penalties, some possibly even losing their lives.

Little is known of the Olmecs' place of origin, but their influence, as with the ball game, was widespread. Their trade routes for coveted jade and obsidian extended north and west to the region of Teotihuacan (Teotihuacán) and south to Oaxaca and Guatemala. Considering that there were no beasts of burden in North America, only human carriers, either destination was a considerable trek, to say nothing of making such a journey with a burden of heavy stone.

The more immediate indigenous native art and architecture styles of the Olmecs, who were by no means the only native group that settled in Central Mexico, spread to numerous locales, where Olmecoid ceramic, shell, and stone vessels and figurines appear. Their products in wood, paper, and cloth have since perished from the archaeological record for the most part. Of the numerous Olmec artistic motifs, the jaguar faces on otherwise human and animal representations is the most common. Additional distinguishing features of Olmec ware are deliberately deformed skulls with a cleft in the forehead, a warrior-type figure with a helmet or cap, and tripod rattle-footed (hollow, except for a bead rattling inside each of the supporting legs) vessels. Whether these were brought in as trade items or were of Olmec-influenced local manufacture has yet to be determined.

Among the most distinctive of all Olmec survivals found in what are believed to be their original settings are the huge basalt heads found throughout southern Veracruz. Quarried at a considerable distance and transported to the coast by raft or canoe, these blocks of basalt had distinctive faces and headdresses carved on them and were positioned at important locales. The sculptured heads could stand as tall as a human being. They may have been portraits and thus emblematic of Olmec kingship, but their purpose is otherwise not known. Some scholars believe that the stones were originally altars or thrones, then were refashioned to commemorate the likeness of a recently deceased ruler. Upon the collapse of Olmec civilization around 400 B.C., the stone heads were defaced and toppled from their imposing perches. Researchers continue to speculate whether the Olmecs' decline can be attributed to internal upheaval or invasion by outsiders.

Yet there is little evidence of large-scale warfare or even substantial sustained long-distance trade on the part of the Olmecs. The difficulty of crossing long stretches of countryside by foot without dependable food supplies limited all such activity—until the invention of the tortilla. The appearance, finally, at late-Olmec sites such as Tlaxcallan (Tlaxcala) and Chalcatzingo, of the *comal*, a ceramic or stone griddle for grilling tortillas and the manufacture of portable comestibles, did not, however, revolutionize Olmec life, for the Olmecs' dominance of the region began to wane shortly thereafter. It remained for their successors to take full advantage of this handy artifact for empire building.

Obviously, the eclipse of Olmec civilization did not signal an end to developments elsewhere. The decline of one region typically was followed by first the gradual, then the extraordinary, development of others. Contemporaneously, native peoples across Mesoamerica were capitalizing on their rich local soils as well as the intellectual and technological legacy of the Olmecs. Smaller in scale but no less important in Mexico's central zone were sites of industry, trade, and other activities at Cuicuilco, Chupícuaro, and Tlatilco. Archaeologists number such sites in the hundreds. Essentially, this was a time of transition, marking the end of the formative era. Likewise, new social groups were establishing centers in new regions that included increasing numbers of subject populations. Eventually, grandiose political capitals such as Teotihuacan, El Tajin, Monte Albán, Tikal, and Kaminaljuyu began to dominate their respective landscapes, signifying the beginning and later heyday of the classic era in Mesoamerican history.

Already in southern Mexico and lowland Guatemala numerous Maya societies were actively involved in consolidating into regional kingdoms. Surely refugee Olmecs or colonists from the Gulf Coast influenced local inhabitants at some point. Over time, these settlements had refined their techniques for land use, especially for food production. In some Maya regions, swidden, or slash-and-burn agriculture in which short-term growing plots are produced by burning off the land, was practiced, and soil fertility was thus short-lived. Depending upon the terrain, fields were left fallow for anywhere from 2 to 20 years. In other regions, raised fields were formed in areas of wetlands, or the latter were drained for more efficient crop management. Here, as elsewhere in Mesoamerica, with the use of a wooden digging stick called a *coa* (*huictli*) fields of maize, beans (small black ones for the Mayas), squash, and chiles produced such quantities as to generate and support an entire hierarchy of rulers, priests, and other specialists. Orchards of fruit, copal (a resin), and cacao were also products natural to the Mayas' farms. Cacao, in particular, was unique to a very select zone of early Maya habitation and thus became the special preserve of the nobility.

During the early classic period, Maya kingdoms such as Tikal (about A.D. 375–600) and Kaminaljuyu (about A.D. 400–650) enjoyed authority over numerous subject populations in the hinterlands of their capitals. Society was essentially made up of two classes: the nobility and the commoners, with slaves as a special category. Along with their role in food production, Maya commoners and slaves

Maya

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were responsible for myriad tasks, not the least of which was the construction and maintenance of sky-soaring pyramid-like temples of stone as well as palaces and other ceremonial structures. Additionally, some of the Maya nonelite worked as artisans and merchants. However, the great majority of any Maya kingdom was made up of commoners, who tended their fields to provide sustenance for all.

The Maya rulers' authority was conveyed through their lineage, advantageous marriages with the right royal partner being secured through traditional succession practices. Additionally, since polygyny (having multiple wives) was practiced by the male nobility, royal heirs who were not in a direct line for succession often optimized their situations by marrying the offspring of political allies, which served to further unite the kingdom. Both the royal daughters and the royal sons, it seems, participated in the politically motivated practice of making marriage alliances.

In some Mesoamerican monarchies, women succeeded to the office of and officiated as queens. Moreover, Tikal's and Kaminaljuyu's positions were enhanced due to their trade affiliation with the thriving kingdom of Teotihuacan in central Mexico. It is possible that the exchange of noble brides served, at least initially, to enhance this long-distance relationship. But obsidian was the principal commodity, and whether by means of warfare or by holding a monopoly on the product, merchants from Teotihuacan made a lasting impression on the highland Mayas. In addition to making biological contributions to the Maya gene pool through bride exchange, Teotihuacan contributed deities and art and architectural styles that were incorporated into Tikal's and Kaminaljuyu's public space and became a very real part of Maya culture.

In turn, because of their enhanced wealth and power, the local Maya rulers waged war successfully on neighboring kingdoms, thus adding to their dependencies. Tikal's and Kaminaljuyu's holds would wane only with the decline of Teotihuacan and the loss of resources from central Mexico. Already, though, major dependencies like Yaxchilan and Copan (Copán) had become dominant hegemonic capitals in their own right. Numerous other Maya kingdoms would flourish at about the same time, especially in the tropical forests of the Peten (Petén), in present-day Guatemala.

Lineage and territory were integral to classic Maya kingdoms. Boundaries were known, warfare a fact of life as rulers ruthlessly waged war against neighboring polities for booty and probably slaves. Conquered kingdoms were not necessarily destroyed but rather became new dependencies obligated to pay tribute. But each entity was essentially ethnically self-centered and autonomous, with its own state hierarchy, congeries of subject peoples, and local customs.

Empire formation, for both social and geographic reasons, seems not to have been practicable. Certainly, the extremes of topography—namely mountain ranges, forests, lakes, and swamps—played a role in limiting the political unification of the region. More likely, however, empires did not arise simply because of the prevailing sociopolitical practices. Warfare was the province of a kin-linked nobility whose entitlement limited the number privileged to engage

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in battle as well as the distribution of the spoils. Not only did the Maya aristocracy comprise an exclusive warrior corps but they dominated trading ventures as well. Therefore, opportunities for the nonelite to profit through warfare or commerce and thus to advance socially apparently did not exist. Although everyone in the polity considered themselves kin, however distant, and thus fellow citizens and patriots, control of each kingdom's resources was vested in a cohort of more closely related elite men and women. Because of this exclusivity, imperial pretensions were self-limited. The royal policy of reciprocating prosperity and protection for the nonelite must have been enough to warrant their continued collective allegiance.

explains

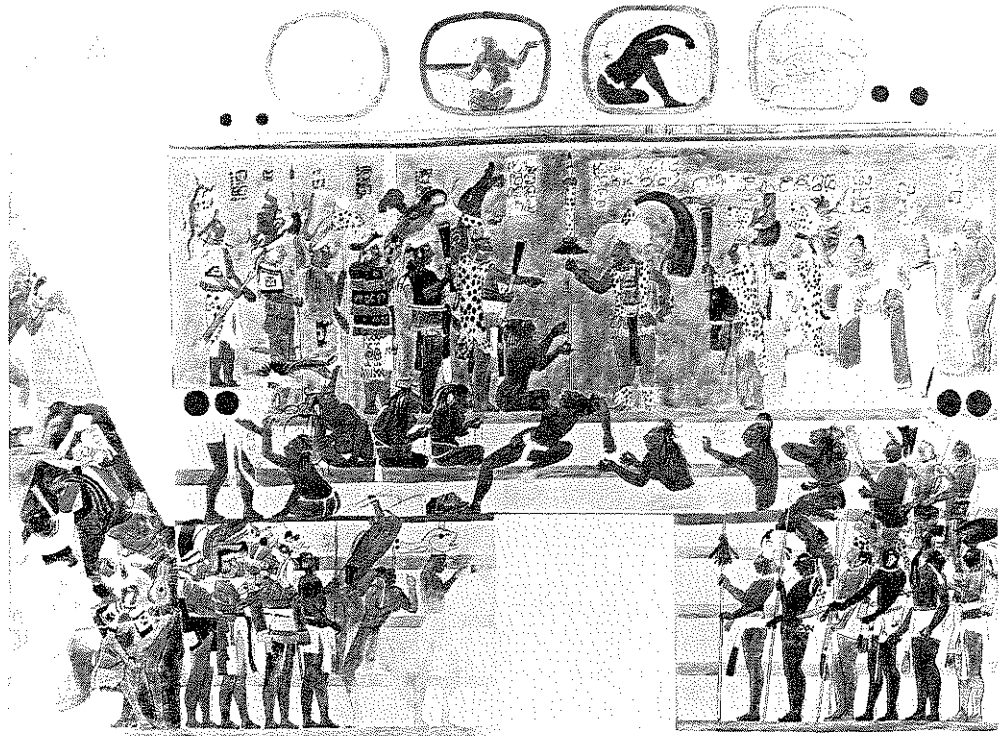
The fact of political independence is not to suggest either simplicity or stasis, though, for the Mayas enjoyed unparalleled intellectual achievements during this period. Their trade networks among their own kingdoms as well as abroad to central Mexico also expanded significantly in these same years. Maya luxuries—feathers, pottery, animal skins, salt, chocolate, jewelry, and slaves—continued to be exchanged for obsidian, shells, rock crystal, alabaster, and other exotica from distant trading entrepôts. In addition, ideas and language accompanied these goods as they moved through the trade corridors. As the Maya kingdoms increased in grandeur, the inclination was for them to compete and to fight one another. But none apparently ever had a grander objective whereby a ruler prevailed by subjecting and integrating all the others beyond his sphere.

There are further remarkable features that characterize the classic Maya kingdoms. One of the first that must be emphasized is the quality of their workmanship in stone, which nearly exceeds imagination. Following Olmec precedents, Maya architects and engineers in places like Palenque, Copan, Yaxchilan, and Piedras Negras, to name a few, designed and constructed enormous pyramids and palaces, many of which were truly magisterial. Craftsmen typically built these structures with dramatic frontal staircases ascending steeply to sculpted roof-comb temples at the top. At Copan a staircase was added faced with intricately worked hieroglyphs now thought to have been a piece of historical propaganda on the part of the ruler to assuage the feelings of Copan's citizens for a recent loss in battle.

Buildings' facades were embellished with handsome portrayals of royalty in high and low relief. Lintels, altars, stelae, and statuary were exquisitely carved and documented with relevant inscriptions in the form of epigraphic, or hieroglyphic, texts, all as part of the court complex. Characteristically for the Mayas, arches took the form of a pointed corbel vault. A corbel arch, a diagnostic of this culture, is a pointed vault used as a roof, often but not always to cover a burial chamber.

Both the exteriors and interiors of Maya buildings were painted, sometimes as fresco, and the walls of inside rooms might be covered with murals depicting Maya life. Of all extant Maya wall paintings, those in three rooms at Bonampak are the most exciting, for these brilliantly painted murals portray the cycle of Maya kingship—from the presentation of a male child as heir to the court and

The discovery of Bonampak in 1946 included this brightly painted mural from Room 2 at the classic Maya site in Chiapas. The image from c. A.D. 800 depicts the victorious aftermath of battle. At the top of a stepped temple Maya rulers are shown in all their jaguar finery, jade jewelry, and magnificent headdresses. Women and numerous high-ranking men, identified by the inscriptions above their heads, form part of the retinue. Captives have been stripped. At least one is dead, and the others, wounded and bleeding, wait to learn their fate.



the murderous warfare necessary to secure that office, to the majesty of rulership in the aftermath of victory.

From these paintings and the enormous variety of stone carvings that have survived we can also determine the appearance of upper-class Mayas and observe what they wore. The nobility of this era enjoyed many luxuries, which included beautifully fashioned jade jewelry in the form of earrings, labrets, necklaces, bracelets, and rings. Their clothing consisted of finely woven and decorated cotton hip- and loincloths for men as well as pectorals, belts, sashes, capes, robes, sandals, and feather-and-jewel headdresses of such variety and magnificence that they practically defy description. The women dressed well, too, and wore a great variety of blouses, skirts, capes, and long gowns, some even brocadelike in their design and texture; nor did they want for fine jewels and beautiful hairpieces.

Beauty truly was in the eye of the Maya beholder. But surely the finest adornments were little appreciated if the wearer had not paid careful attention to the physical as well. Maya aesthetics required that the cranium be molded in a certain manner. Ideally, the forehead was flattened to be in line with the plane of the nose. Crossed eyes were thought to be attractive, especially for women, and both men and women pierced their noses, earlobes, and lips to display precious gems. Tattooing, or face painting, on the cheeks and chin was another cosmetic device, and one's smile was considered beautiful only if the teeth had been filed with ridges or drilled and inlaid with exquisite jewels. Hair was done up and often



covered with an elaborate headdress. At other times women wore it tied or hanging long and straight down their backs.

Most Maya elites were trim and stately, although some of the men were definitely hefty, with large potbellies. Seniority did not exclude one from the court, for elders were valued for their wisdom. Rulers sat on jaguar-skin-covered thrones in their palaces with staffs of authority and other royal paraphernalia about. They were attended by an elaborate retinue of regal lesser nobles, each with his or her own insignia, many if not all no doubt related in some manner. When the king left the palace on official occasions, he was usually transported in a litter. His wives, who were an important part of the court, too, were usually close by, fixing him a drink of chocolate, fanning themselves, or looking admiringly in mirrors. Female slaves taken in raids or battle were likely responsible for attending to a range of domestic duties on behalf of the nobility.

The Mayas' cuisine was based on corn (maize), beans, and a variety of other vegetables, along with as much meat and fish as local hunters could supply. The comal for preparing tortillas did not exist in Maya households. No one knows exactly why the Mayas did not use the comal. Rather, it is thought that tamales and maize-based gruels and stews were preferred dishes. Banquets and feasting were an important part of ceremonies, whether social or religious. After successful battles, rulers typically shared some of their goods, including food, with their subordinates, who presumably distributed what was left among the commoners. Women were the cooks and servers, and royal women most often dined apart from men.

*Balche*, an intoxicating beverage made from local bee's honey fermented with bark, was consumed by nobles and commoners alike. However, following a meal, only royalty partook of the frothed chocolate beverage thought to be such a delicacy. Drunk from a ceramic vessel designed especially for the occasion, and sometimes seasoned with chile powder, *achiote* (similar to allspice), or vanilla, chocolate in all its consummate elegance completed the repast. Other stimulants and intoxicants, such as nicotine and local hallucinogens, might also be taken on ceremonial occasions as inhalants or instilled as colonics.

Music was always a part of Mesoamerican pageantry, and professional musicians as composers and instrumentalists doubtless enjoyed special status and rewards for their contributions. It seems to be the case that they were members of an aristocratic subculture along with advisors, scribes, priests, and other artists and craftspeople. Mayan musical instruments were of two genres, wind and percussion, with song and dance a part of every performance. At Bonampak, drums, trumpets, and gourd and tortoise-shell rattles were played in heraldic concert, but whistles, flutes, rattles, and rasps—ingeniously fashioned from shell, bone (sometimes human), wood, and clay—were also among Mesoamerica's musical instruments.

Kingship was the centerpiece of Maya life and empowerment derived from history, which was understood as local sacred knowledge invested in and manipulated by the ruler. Sacred knowledge included understanding time and the

universe and the Mayas' relationship to both. Over the centuries, most Mesoamericans had worked out for themselves a nearly exact calendar system with a 52-year count based on astronomical observations and mathematical calculations. Very likely because of their need to determine optimal periods for planting and harvesting crops, indigenous scientists devised a means to reckon time based upon two calendar cycles.

One cycle was of 260 days, organized in a series of months from 1 to 13, each with 20 named days. The second cycle was of 365 days (the solar year) with 18 named months of 20 days each, followed by 5 "unlucky days" at the end. These calendars operated like two wheels of days, one somewhat larger than the other, that moved together and past each other in a steady rhythm. A given day in the 260-day calendar also had a position in the 365-day count, and every 52 years the two would coincide.

Maya intellectuals kept careful track of these time spans and elaborated their calculations in a long count that allowed them to date events of the past, present, and future with great accuracy. Reckoning by vigesimal multiples, or the counting by units of 20, rather than the more familiar decimal multiples, or units of 10 familiar today in the United States, they also established a sophisticated number system and used dots (one equal to 1) and bars (one equal to a count of five) to quantify Maya time and material culture.

The march of time for the Mesoamericans was intimately related to their cosmology, in which both the deities and men played vital roles. Months were named and had specific characteristics. Moreover, each month was associated with a particular deity whose duty it was to bear the burden of that period of time from beginning to end. Prophecy played a major role in interpreting time and the significance of the date of one's birth could prognosticate one's entire future. Celestial and environmental phenomena such as comets, earthquakes, floods, and famines were recorded and juxtaposed with other historical events.

The Mayas' religion was complex, for there was a full pantheon of deities to be reckoned with on a regular basis. The Maya world was divided into three horizontal strata. A series of layers of heavens lay uppermost. This sphere was followed by a middle one with all the trees and earthly things the Maya knew so well. Below that was an underworld, Xibalba, of nine planes. These three zones were sacred and connected with one another, but only Mayas who died in battle, while giving birth, or as victims of sacrifice were exempted from the dreaded Xibalba. All the others, as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, were consigned to descend to the underworld and meet again forever in a Mayan afterlife.

The Mayas believed the creator of man to be an entity they called Hunab Ku, an abstract, elusive deity. He was the father of almighty Itzamna, god of the sky, the day, and the night. But the cosmos was not all beyond the reach of ordinary Mayas, for they believed that four *batabob* (lords) representing the cardinal directions and sacred colors (east—red; west—black or blue; south—yellow; north—white) held up the sky. A fifth direction, the center, was green. The sun, above all, literally, with its many theological attributes, was life and renewal as it

made its daily round, cutting through all the spheres while keeping the Maya world whole.

Information about the kingship, time, and their deities was made available to the Maya public on the facades of palaces, temples, and stelae. Sacred knowledge was also recorded as history in codices, or books, with beautifully executed inscriptions and other images on screenfold (long sheets that were folded together as one does a screen or stretched open for reading) pages of bark or deerskin, which were paperlike products. Such sages as priests, kings, and scientists hoarded these books and copied and elaborated on their texts according to the occasion.

The Mayas had a rich syllabary language that greatly facilitated their production of written texts. Spoken words could be elaborated with signs, or logographs. Many such literary or spoken devices were inordinately complex in meaning, and not all of the texts have been translated even today. And doubtless not all Mayas could read these histories at the time they were produced, but their significance would have been made known to everyone at ceremonies when the kings and queens came before their fellow Mayas.

Ancestral privilege, prescribed as sacrosanct in the texts, conferred divine authority. Maya rulers drew upon these histories for consolation in periods of hardship and for inspiration when it was time to wage war. Invoking their subjects and their deities by means of gruesome self-mutilation—drawing blood with razorlike slashes on their ears, tongue, and penis—along with the intensity of ritual song and dance, burning torches and incense, and dramatic rhetoric, Maya rulers became the kingdom incarnate through blood sacrifice. Even commoners in locales too distant to permit firsthand participation at royal performances knew the ceremonies, understood that they were presented on their behalf, and felt their membership in the body politic to be secure.

Nevertheless, some things, such as a shift in economic power that occurred during the later years of the classical era in central Mexico, were beyond the control of the Maya kings, and by the end of the ninth century their influence was declining. Theories abound regarding reasons for the “classic Maya collapse,” including epidemic disease, invasion, soil exhaustion and drought prompting agricultural collapse, and internal upheaval. Even a shift from the use of overland trading routes to new commercial waterways may have contributed to the Mayas’ downfall. At any rate, the centers of the great Maya ethnic states were gradually abandoned one after the other, never to flourish again. The surviving Mayas dispersed, some emigrating to join native groups on the Yucatan Peninsula, which became the locus of control for trade between Mexico and areas south to Panama. Other Mayas moved into the volcanic highlands.

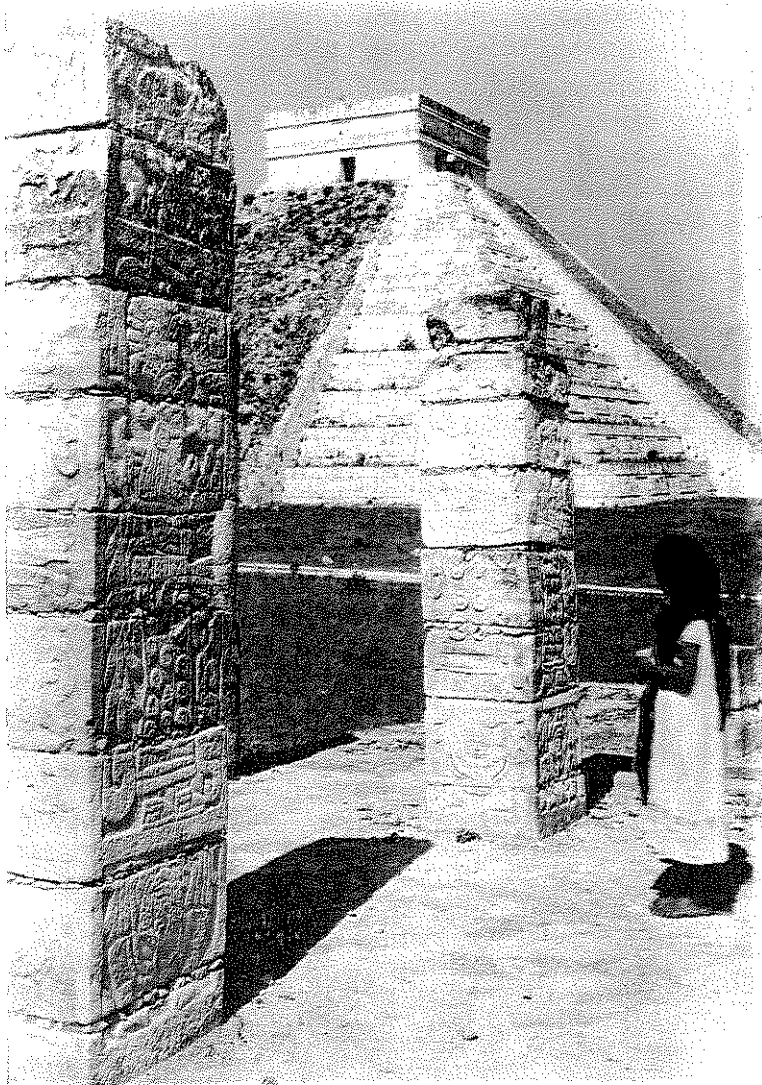
By the 11th century, well into what is described as the postclassic era, Maya settlements came under the influence of a series of invaders from various regions in central Mexico: the Chontal Mayas, Putuns, Toltecs, and others. Presumably, peninsular and highland Mayas had been trading with many of these groups for centuries. But exactly what prompted their large-scale move into the region is not

This is a masterpiece of classic Maya stone carving from a lintel at Yaxchilan, in lowland Guatemala, c. A.D. 725. King Shield Jaguar holds a burning torch while his kneeling queen, Lady Xoc, passes a thorn-embedded rope through her tongue as a blood offering. The finery of her robe, heavy jade pectoral, and bracelet and the elaborate headdresses of both rulers are especially ornate details. Hieroglyphic inscriptions record the names and titles of the individuals, the date (28 October A.D. 709), and the event.



known. In Yucatan, the newcomer Itzas established their capital at Chichen Itza (Chichén Itzá), which is distinguished by its stunning architecture, stelae, ball courts, feathered serpent motif, and other features that are close in style partly to postclassic period structures at Tollan (believed to be modern-day Tula) in central Mexico but overall in most ways now considered to be distinctively Maya. Ethnically far more heterogeneous than any classic Maya rulership, and thus able to take great advantage of a range of innovative social and political practices, the Itzas would hold sway in northern Yucatan for close to two centuries.

Ultimately, however, the ancient tradition of Mayan lineage-based kingship prevailed. An alliance of dominant kin groups asserted itself and in 1221 successfully overthrew the Itzas. Centralized authority thus shifted from Chichen Itza to Mayapan (Mayapán), where several royal lineages that were in league, yet borrowing innovations from Chichen Itza, changed the prevailing art and architectural styles once again while they revitalized historical writing practices in the form of hieroglyphic inscriptions.



The *castillo* from the Temple of the Warriors is one of the most impressive structures at Chichen Itza, a Maya site. The Mayas dominated Yucatan for nearly two centuries until losing authority to Mayapan in 1221.

Thus, from 1221 to 1440 classic-style Maya lineages enjoyed dominance in Yucatan, at least until one group overthrew the others, shattering the confederacy. Subsequently, the governance of Yucatan broke into some 16 warring factions that fought one another for control of such local resources as salt and cacao but probably also continued to participate in long-distance trade networks. In the Maya highlands, the Quiche and Cakchiquel peoples claiming descent from central Mexico's much mythologized Toltec ancestors developed into formidable warring kingdoms, unifying and dominating the region until the 16th century.

It is about these Mayas that the Spaniards first wrote home, and it was Tulum's towers and palaces high on the cliffs above the Caribbean, one of the trade centers that succeeded Mayapan, that so impressed them. Appalled though they were at some of the Mayas' religious and social practices, the Spaniards nevertheless (and

perhaps inadvertently) wrote favorably of the native peoples they met. It is from these reports that we cull critical historical information regarding the lives of the ordinary Mayas: their household living compounds; sizable, well-organized towns with adjacent cultivated fields; local government; cuisine; dress; tools and weapons; language, and, above all, their inordinate hospitality. Cycles of conquest were nothing new to Maya history. The Maya peoples still cherished and consulted their codices. That the Spaniards had similar sources of sacred knowledge seemed not to have been particularly remarkable to these Mesoamericans who had long perfected their own to rationalize nearly all the phenomena in the cosmos.

Contributing significantly to the formation of the Mayas' great rulerdoms was their connection through trade and perhaps marriage alliances with Teotihuacan (about A.D. 1-700), a contemporary classic-era site and society in north-central Mexico. By A.D. 200, Teotihuacan was a full-fledged indigenous metropolis with a commercial empire that facilitated first the development and then later the unification of numerous major polities that came to encompass peoples as far away as the Gulf Coast as well as Mexico's southernmost regions.

By all accounts the city of Teotihuacan was unique. Vast yet urbane, Teotihuacan has no known precedent in terms of sheer size, aesthetic refinement, or political ideology in all Mesoamerica. At its height, Teotihuacan epitomized all the best of the classic era's sophistication. Legend holds that Teotihuacan (a Nahuatl term signifying "where the gods lived") was where native deities first sacrificed themselves for the benefit of humans. Pyramids built upon or enclosing womblike caves corroborate local creation myths about the societies who first populated the region. There was in Teotihuacan an intimate association between gods and humans, and certainly their deities had a major influence on the lives of the large number of people who inhabited Teotihuacan over the course of at least five centuries. Indeed, their pyramids, temples, statuary, and murals commemorate a near pantheon of spiritual beings. In fact, and contrary to practices elsewhere in Mesoamerica, religion outweighed dynastic politics at Teotihuacan. No longer is the city believed to have been an idyllic paradise free of strife and violence of any sort. But neither was a warmongering lineage-based dynasty the center of life at Teotihuacan.

Although the people of Teotihuacan were surely ruled by native kings, who at one point dominated a population numbering close to 200,000 citizens, they apparently felt no great need for permanent public display of either their sovereignty or their individual accomplishments. Rather, if they appear at all in visual or oral history records, humans are most often deity impersonators. In beautifully painted murals of Teotihuacan-like universes, miniature figures with scroll-shaped designs in front of their mouths representing speech sing in praise of the munificence of the city's gods, who provided an abundance of rain and sunshine, flora and fauna. While familiar Mesoamerican counting and calendar systems were known and used in Teotihuacan, it seems that most other sacred knowledge there was theologically oriented. Even their monolithic stone sculptures, temple facades, and ceramicware were fashioned after deities.

Prevailing in the pantheon were images of a rain god (Tlaloc or Tláloc) and a water goddess (Chalchihuitlicue) a sun god and a moon goddess, an old fire god, and, of course, the omnipresent feathered serpent (Quetzalcoatl or Quetzalcóatl). Most ominous was Xipe Totec (Our Flayed Lord), the god of spring and renewal, whose deity impersonator actually wore the flayed skin of a sacrificed human.

This pervasive interest in religion should not be taken to imply that Teotihuacan was without the usual top-heavy bureaucracy of rulers and priests, along with cadres of councillors, merchants, and artists. The city monopolized obsidian along with other valuable commodities that were exchanged within the extensive trade emporium. Not uncommonly, guilds of craftsmen from distant centers at Monte Albán or Veracruz were relocated to Teotihuacan, where they oversaw the production of exotic goods that were otherwise unavailable domestically. As expatriates they made important contributions to the heterogeneous culture of the cosmopolitan city. At least one major district was set aside for the enterprise of Zapotec artisans.

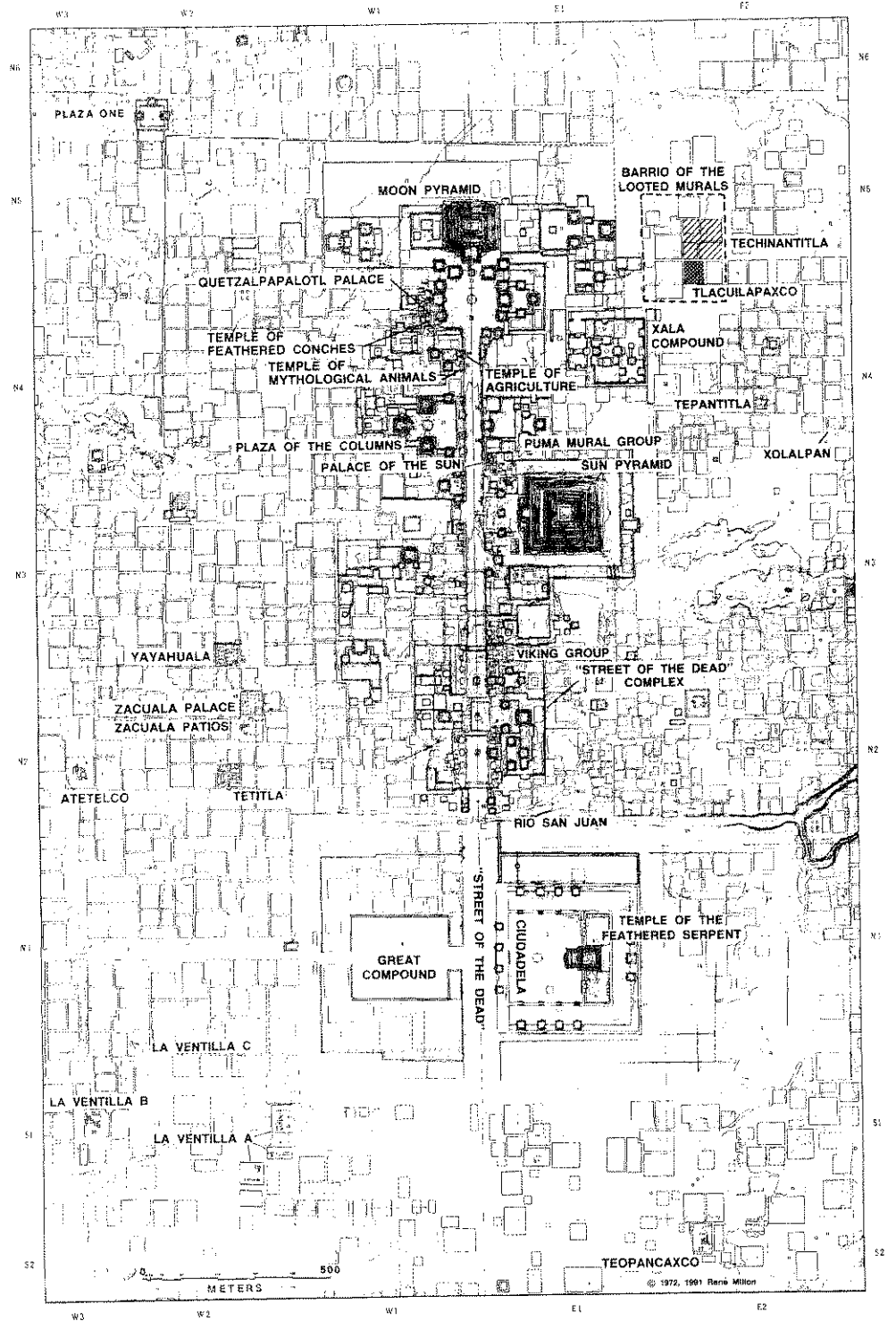
Of all Teotihuacan's contributions to Mesoamerican culture, however, the most lasting was that of urban planning and architecture. Many indigenous societies in Mexico considered the number four to be a sacred quantity. Based upon what became the pattern for many successor states, some researchers postulate that Teotihuacan was divided into city quarters. Archaeological evidence indicates that the huge pyramids of the sun and moon were erected first along a central north-south axis, following a grid pattern.

Construction priorities in Teotihuacan then shifted to residential and temple structures. Each subdivision was made up of large square apartment complexes, some comprising as many as 175 units. Low-roofed, single-storied, and windowless, these apartments had fabric-covered doorways that opened onto well-ventilated, well-lit patios, which doubtless served a great variety of social functions. Each apartment had stately columned foyers that led to spacious lower-level courtyards. The buildings' stone facades were wonderfully worked with low-relief decorative designs.

These apartments were likely extended family compounds or clusters of accommodations for kin housed separately around a single patio. We know little of daily life in and around Teotihuacan, but most individuals were certainly involved in farming and other such activities in support of the city. The average man at Teotihuacan is thought to have been about 1.61 meters tall (about 5 feet 3 inches); a woman's height was approximately 1.45 meters (about 4 feet 9 inches). Their life expectancy is somewhat generously estimated to have been between 35 and 40 years.

The city's rulers probably lived in a separate area adjacent to the temple dedicated to the worship of Quetzalcoatl, now called the Ciudadela. A palace structure often included as many as 45 rooms along with atriums and courtyards, with ceremonial platforms nearby. It is in the palaces that the most exquisite murals are found, telling reminders of the inhabitants' ongoing preoccupation with the profound relationship of their deities to the natural world.

The center of the classic-era city of Teotihuacan (Teotihuacán) encompassed some seven square kilometers. This diagram reveals urban planning around the central "Street of the Dead," or "Great Avenue," along with numerous palaces, temples, courtyards, and residential and manufacturing districts as well as the famed Temple of the Feathered Serpent.





Other motifs portray disquietingly fierce coyotes and jaguars, symbols that may be indicative of a militancy that would be institutionalized during the post-classic period. Other sectors of the city were designated solely for the manufacture of a plethora of items for trade and domestic consumption. However, the importance of obsidian during the classic era cannot be overstated, for at Teotihuacan at least 350 shops to work the material are known to have existed.

Shortly after A.D. 500, Teotihuacan's large population began to contract, and within a century key areas of the city were defaced by fire. What precipitated the downfall of a city of such grandeur and magnitude has yet to be determined. Whether directly related or not to Teotihuacan's decline, the influence of other quite extraordinary classic-era sites, such as Cholollan (today's Cholula), to the east, and Monte Albán, in the south-central region, among many others, also diminished over time. As with the great classic Maya capitals, these centers lost their influence and shrank demographically and territorially.

Over time, displaced groups, some migrating from the north, moved into the region and began to fill the void with their own still evolving and quite foreign social and political practices. Eventually, though, the outsiders would establish new capitals and dominions. Into what is known as the postclassic period, Mesoamerican society would never again achieve the general level of cultural sophistication that exemplified classical Teotihuacan or any of its contemporaries. Mexico's golden age was already in the past.

As had been the case in central Mexico since the beginnings of the Olmec civilization about 1500 B.C., a particular state might prevail politically and economically, but its preeminence depended upon the prosperity of a full complement of other polities for their trade, tribute (in some instances), and social alliances. For many, this was an advantageous relationship, jeopardized only when outsiders threatened the status quo.

The years following the fall of Teotihuacan were marked by cycles with influxes of outsiders who spoke different languages and had distinct cultures. No one knows the origin of these newcomers, called Chichimeca (Chichimecs)—a term of disputed definition—by the settled, more sophisticated societies in central Mexico. Nahuatl legends state that the Chichimeca came from Mexico's northern frontier, where human survival depended on hunting and gathering, sometimes over great distances. Characterized as a "desert culture," the Chichimeca subsisted with rudimentary material goods and by moving from place to place. Each group set out on its own, some already having leaders, one of whom was a "god carrier" with a deity bundle on his back. Of course, the Chichimeca also carried bows, arrows, and other weapons for hunting as well as for defense against marauders.

These natives might stay at a place for a few years to plant and harvest crops before pressing on. And following their calendar system—with regularity, apparently—they conducted their sacred fire ceremonies and "tied up their years" as part of the 52-year cycle described earlier. Their indigenous histories, called annals, are filled with stories of their trials and tribulations in the decades and

even centuries of their peregrinations as various of the groups worked their way toward the fertile lands in central Mexico. Centuries later, the great kingdoms of Tetzcoco and Chalco would exalt the qualities of the Chichimeca—ruggedness, fortitude, success—and resurrect the name to dignify their highest-ranking lord and king, who became the “Chichimeca lord.”

What distinguished these intruders from their classic-era predecessors was their militancy. Most notable among the intruders were the Toltecs, who established their capital at Tollan (Tula) a site some 60 kilometers (35 miles) southwest of Teotihuacan. The mythohistories tell of early Tula’s patrician ruler-priest Topiltzin, who was devoted to the worship of the peace-abiding cult of Quetzalcóatl. Benevolent and well loved by his subjects, Topiltzin Acxiti Quetzalcóatl, as he came to be known, was nevertheless tricked by the vengeful, ruthless deity Tezcatlipoca. It is said that, most unbecomingly, Topiltzin committed incest and engaged in other lascivious activities. Ashamed because of the dishonor he brought on Tula’s rulership, the king went to the Gulf Coast and departed by sea to exile sometime toward the end of the 10th century. In another version he was cremated upon arriving at the coast, then appeared in the heavens as Venus, the morning star.

These popular accounts convey little about the Toltec warrior cults, their actual warfare, or the practice of human sacrifice that was becoming commonplace. They do tell, however, of social conflict and factionalism, and help to explain in part the fall of Tula. As mentioned, when the Toltecs dispersed, some sectors joined forces with the Mayas and other central Mexico-influenced groups to establish their rule at Chichen Itza in Yucatan. Other Toltec descendants participated in the formation of the Quiche and Cakchiquel kingdoms that dominated the highlands of Guatemala well into the 16th century. The majority of the Toltecs, though, apparently stayed in central Mexico, relocating to sites such as Cholula (Cholollan), where they joined already settled groups and constructed one of the largest pyramids in all the Americas to perpetuate the worship of Quetzalcoatl.

It is the Toltec capital itself that exemplifies the indigenous beliefs and practices in the postclassic period (about A.D. 900–1150). Almost standard in Mesoamerica by this time were its pyramids, temples, ball courts, residential structures, altars, and monolithic stone columns or stelae. But at Tula the dramatic stone pillars are in the form of fearsome serpents and intimidating human warriors in full regalia. Even more awesome are the larger-than-life Chacmool, stone-carved humans holding basins to receive human hearts. Decorative motifs on temple walls portray images of Toltec military legions and their orders of the eagle, jaguar, and coyote. Skull racks and a painted serpent wall depict human sacrifice and cannibalism.

Gone were the reverential deity impersonators singing in glory of life and nature from the days of Teotihuacan. There was now no place for such worship at Tula, as was seen by the outcast king Topiltzin Acxiti Quetzalcoatl. These gods demanded more: War was the lifeblood of the Toltecs.

As at Teotihuacan, obsidian was the Toltecs' economic mainstay. Especially important by this time were the sharp glasslike points for weapons such as the *atlatl*, darts, and clubs, as well as the finely worked ceremonial knives that were used to extract hearts from sacrificial victims.

Toward the end of the 12th century, it is probable that internal strife combined with new waves of invaders from the north contributed to the end of Toltec supremacy. Tula had already been pillaged and burned, but its greatness remained permanently committed to the historical memories of its successors.

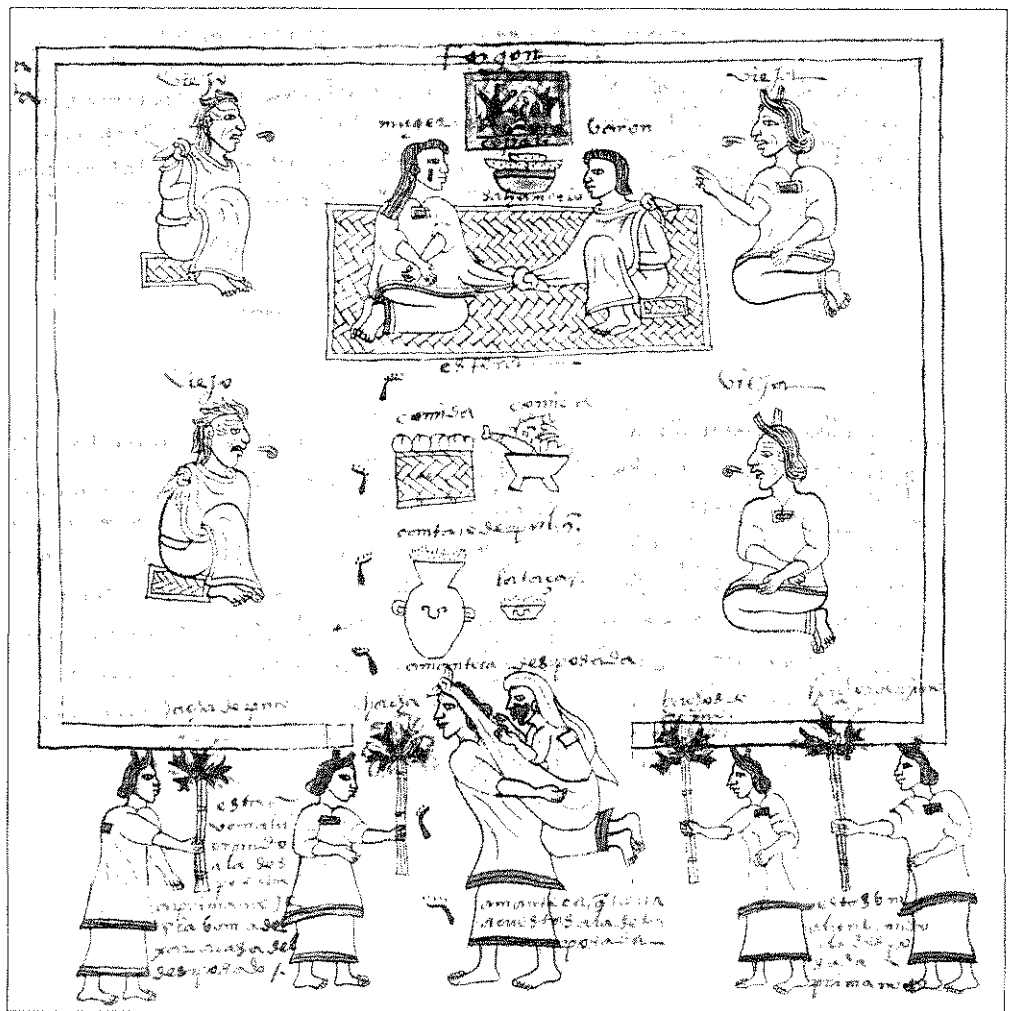
Although it was much influenced by Teotihuacan and its obsidian empire, the contemporary capital of Monte Albán in south-central Mexico was somewhat off the beaten path and thus in some ways suffered less of a chronological and cultural break than other such centers at the end of the classic period. Long inhabited by Zapotec speakers who independently and very early developed their own writing system, Monte Albán was first among numerous Zapotec capitals in Oaxaca. Architecturally, the Zapotecs' temples, platforms, and altars reflect a classic but somewhat modified *talud-tablelero* pattern (an architectural feature where progressively sloping walls are interrupted with horizontal panel insets at each level), enhanced with elaborately worked exterior geometric designs.

As one might expect, most of the deities were similar to those at Teotihuacan and elsewhere, but with Zapotec names. Additionally, Monte Albán is known for the *Danzantes*, an arresting formative period parade of stone-carved wall panels showing some 150 representations of dead nude male figures. Perhaps signifying the conquest of former kings and thus serving as a warning for everyone else, the *Danzantes* are haunting reminders of the cycles of violence and upheaval that societies suffered even during the earliest years of Mesoamerican history.

Monte Albán ceramicware was as rich and varied as any, with many pieces taking the form of urns fashioned after local deities. Not uncommonly, vases, urns, and other pottery were included as funeral offerings in burial chambers, along with the immolated remains of humans. The Zapotecs' tombs, more than 170 of which have been excavated, are especially revealing of these people's worldview, for the chambers were lavishly decorated and filled with splendid gifts. Murals cover the walls in commemoration of their gods and the dignity of the recently deceased ruler. Moreover, written inscriptions in the form of hieroglyphs were ubiquitous at Monte Albán from formative times, although most of the glyphs have yet to be deciphered. Quite clearly, Zapotec intellectual developments influenced numerous societies, such as the Mayas in the south and in the east near Cacaxtla and Tlaxcallan, as well as other groups at their satellite manufacturing center in Teotihuacan.

Within their own sphere, the Zapotecs had established political alliances with another powerful group, the Mixtecs, in order to wage war against an enemy kingdom in Tehuantepec. Later the ties between the Zapotecs and the Mixtecs were secured through marriages between the royal houses of the two groups. Ultimately, as successors to the Zapotecs' realm, it was the Mixtecs who seemed to perfect the practice of marriage across political boundaries as a principal means of

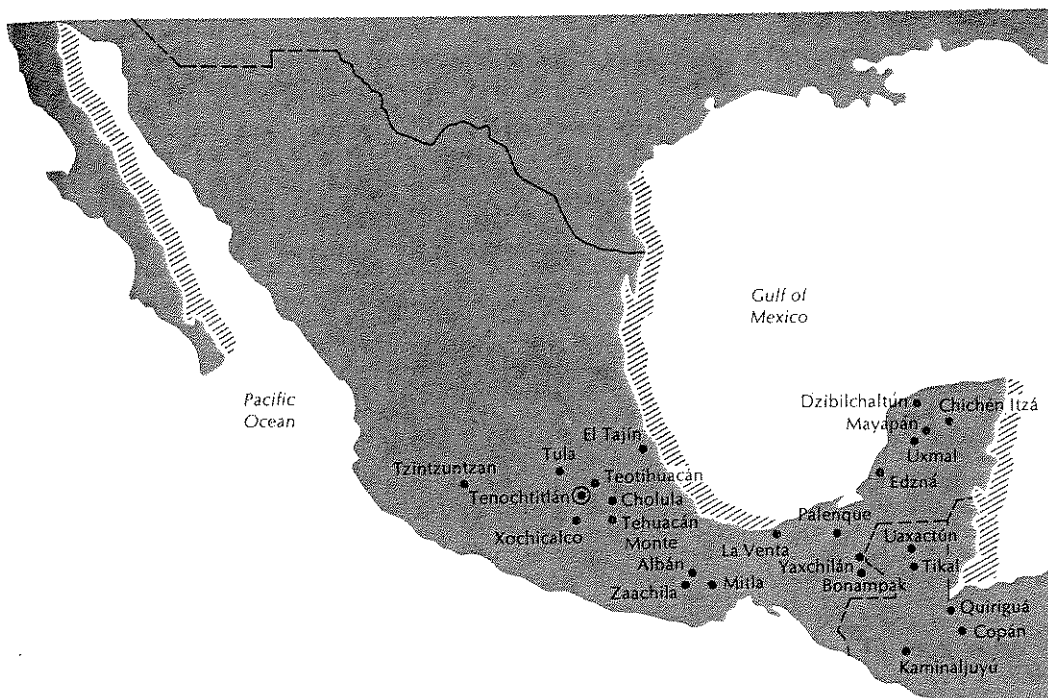
An early 16th-century Mexica Tenochca marriage scene. The bride and groom literally "tie the knot" as elders give advice to the couple. The marriage between the fifteen-year-old girl and the significantly older man was arranged by a matchmaker.



consolidating the area under each ethnic group's control. Once that was accomplished, lineages became so exclusive that, often enough, siblings married each other to singularize dynastic rule.

In postclassic Mesoamerica, Mixtec intellectuals—artists, architects, and scholars—established prestigious powerful enclaves in which they elaborated upon the legacy of their predecessors. At Mitla, for example, the intricate design and ornamentation of the temple complex were unparalleled. Their decorative art, whether in crystal, jade, gold, bone, or ceramic, was delicate and refined. And their codices were masterpieces in the manner of literary texts providing a history of their personal and political development. Some that have survived serve as precious, lasting records of Mixtec high society.

As with the ruler of the Mayas, the Mixtec rulers' authority derived from the culture's sacred books, written historical and genealogical accounts that typically traced back over centuries. It is likely that each dynastic house maintained its own records and used them to legitimate the lineage, keep track of time, and



Principal  
Archaeological Sites  
in Mesoamerica.

follow the mandates of their deities. Mostly pictographic, the images in these texts likely served as encoded mnemonic devices for a king, priest, or laureate who elaborated the records in a high discursive style at political and religious ceremonies. During these grand occasions, musical festivities in the form of song and dance were still traditionally a part of each auspicious presentation, and everyone was brought into the celebration in one way or another as they not only shared in the retelling of their glorious history but also doubtless learned about all that was new for their society on that particular day.

Apt successors to and purveyors of infamous Toltec legend, the Mexica (who in the 15th century were instrumental in forming what is popularly called the Aztec Empire), or Aztecs, as they came to be known, were among a series of newcomers to central Mexico in the 13th century. According to native annals, they were one of several groups (the Chalca, Xochimilca, Tepaneca, and other peoples) who set out from the legendary remoteness in the north called Chicomoctoc, "Place of Seven Caves," in A.D. 1064. The cosmogony of the Mexica and their contemporaries was similar to that at Teotihuacán, where both deities and humans symbolically emerged from caves. The stories about the Mexica and their odyssey across the land and waters from the north are the best known, but all seven groups of Chichimeca travelers eventually made their way to Mexico's fertile central basin and established themselves in or near locales many of which have similar place-names today.

Mexica men, women, and children made up the party. Along with a succession of leaders, one or more priests carried their principal god from one place to

another, appeasing the spiritual pantheon with appropriate ceremonies as they journeyed. These rituals did not exempt the travelers from hardship, however, which included warfare with other groups as well as horrific, competitive battles among their deities. At a site called Coatepec, near Tula, the god Huitzilopochtli prevailed, but only after first being forced to slaughter his malicious sister, Coyolxauhqui, immediately after his birth, when he was already a fully outfitted adult warrior, then consume the heart of their priestess-mother, Coatlicue, whom his sister had killed. According to their legends, it was through Huitzilopochtli's counsel that the Mexica ultimately arrived at their promised land and later established their rule as the Aztecs over much of Mexico from 1428 to 1521. The Mexica were thus obliged to their god thereafter.

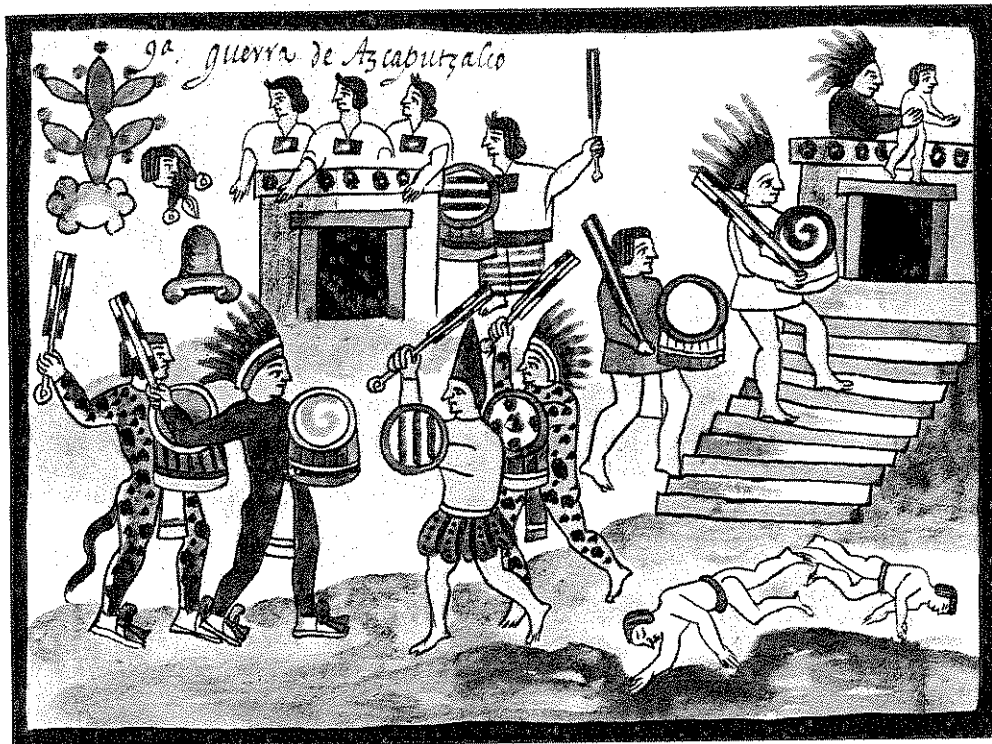
But the Mexica had to prove themselves first, for as crude Chichimeca they were not welcomed by the long-settled, culturally refined peoples in any region. Accordingly, among various strategies to secure themselves a prime place to live, the Mexica offered themselves to the rulers of Toltec-connected Culhuacan (Colhuacan) as mercenaries against a rival government, and as proof of their prowess they brought back bags filled with the ears of their victims.

The records are legion regarding the Mexicas' exploits during these early years. The following example of an attempt to secure their relationship with Culhua royalty, while surely the most vivid, also foreshadows things to come. Subscribing to the popular myth of Toltec supremacy, the Mexica aspired to try to establish an ancestral affiliation with them through a marital alliance of one of their young men with the daughter of the king of Culhuacan, only to sacrifice the bride-princess, flay her, and have one of their deity-impersonator priests don her skin and display himself before her terrified father at a ceremony in honor of Xipe Totec. Of course, all the Mexica were banished from Culhuacan.

Undaunted, the Mexica followed Huitzilopochtli's prophecy that they should persist until they saw the symbol of an eagle with a serpent in its beak perched on a tall cactus. Thus, in A.D. 1324, while still much in disfavor, they settled on a rattlesnake-infested island, apparently the only place left for them. They named their home Mexico Tenochtitlan, "Place Next to the Prickly Pear Cactus," and the serpent and the eagle became permanent icons of Mexica culture.

But now that they were subject to the powerful rulers of the Tepanecas, whose capital was at Azcapotzalco, the Mexica were obligated to pay tribute and supply warriors to aid the Tepanecas in their conquests of additional peoples and territories. The Mexica also labored diligently to gentrify their Chichimeca ways by emulating the social manners of others with whom they came in contact.

Yet all the while the Mexica were developing their own social and economic situation at Tenochtitlan by means of *chinampa* agriculture. *Chinampas* were raised fields usually located in swampy areas or on the margins of lakes surrounding an island. Raised fields were formed from muck scooped from the lake bed and piled high in rows that could be easily irrigated and cultivated. This was an intensive form of agriculture, and since the soil was unusually fertile, specialty crops often were the preferred produce.



The Mexica conquered the kingdom of Azcapotzalco under the leadership of Itzcoatl and Tlacaehlel Cihuacoatl. The artist depicts weapons, warrior attire, and battle protocol along with the defeated, stripped warriors at the foot of the conquered ruler's palace. In this painting, even women take up arms.

It is likely that by the mid-1350s Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, was the dominant language in central Mexico, although Otomi, Pinome, and numerous other languages were also spoken. Best described as Nahuas in a general sense and because their language was largely the lingua franca of Mesoamerica, all the peoples in central Mexico nonetheless cultivated ethnic-based group identities. The independent Nahua political groupings were known as the *altepetl*, a compound of *atl* (water) and *tepetl* (mountain) that metaphorically signified the indigenous concept of kingdom or ethnic state, each with its own distinct name, territory, rulership, and society. These sovereign Nahua polities sought to enhance their wealth and prestige through trade, marital alliance, warfare, and subjugation.

The Mexica, still striving to establish their legitimacy through pointing up their Toltec ancestry, once again solicited a royal marriage with a Culhua woman. The offspring of this union, a son named Acamapichtli, thus ennobled, became the founder of and the first *tlatoani*, "He Who Says Something," in effect the king of the Mexica dynasty (see Table 2, page 77, for a list of the Mexica and Aztec leaders and kings). Acamapichtli enriched Mexico Tenochtitlan's human and material resources considerably, making it possible for his son Huitzilihuitl and then his grandson Chimalpopoca to succeed him and continue to expand the *altepetl*.

But it was Chimalpopoca's uncle, Itzcoatl, who took the kingdom to its apex while laying the foundation for the Aztec empire. With the assistance of other

rulers, Itzcoatl conquered Azcapotzalco and created new alliances with the Tepanecas, the former overlords of the Mexica. Under this new regime succession to Mexica rulership depended not only on meritorious personal character and stalwart behavior on the battlefield but on the official approval of one's royal cohorts as well.

It cannot be said that the Mexica were necessarily innovators. Rather, their genius lay in appropriating established ideologies and practices and employing them for their own exaggerated purposes. The Mexica worldview—whether in religion, politics, economics, or society—fundamentally mirrored that of their predecessors. Theirs was a fourfold universe as well; they structured their lives after that sophisticated and complex cosmic principle.

Ideally, and following established Mesoamerican precedents, Mexica society was composed of two classes: nobles and commoners. But success as a warrior or merchant, or a good marriage, afforded considerable social mobility, and there were many exceptions to the rule. Likewise, Mexico Tenochtitlan was divided into four ranked cardinal Mesoamerican quadrants: Moyotlan in the southwest, Teopan in the southeast, Atzacualco in the northeast, and Cuepopan in the northwest. However, east, always the principal Mesoamerican direction, no longer ranked first.

The quarters of the altepetl were further divided into subunits called *calpolli*, which are more generally thought to be made up of commoners. Each *calpolli*, usually four or six in number, was headed by a lord-ruler who saw to the general well-being of the community, the collecting of tribute, the fulfillment of *calpolli* religious obligations, and the periodic channeling of required goods and labor to the *altepetl tlatoani*, or king, who in turn directed a portion of the commoners' obligations on to the *huey tlatoani*, or great king, the Aztec emperor. Each subunit was a self-contained, separate, equal unit with its own name, space, leader, deity, and society that mimicked the kingdom writ small. Efficiency in organization and operation was achieved by ranking the polities and the rulers of each constituency and systematically rotating their duties.

The Nahua household was the *calpolli* and *altepetl* in microcosm. The Nahua lacked a term for the family. At this most intimate level Nahua social organization was typically based upon a cluster of any number of houses opening onto a common patio, with sometimes several generations of occupants related by blood and marriage. Kinship, then, in one way or another bound the unit together, with an adult male probably serving as head of the overall household. Grandparents and parents, possibly widowed, with their children, siblings, nieces, nephews, and orphans (in no set pattern, it seems) might live in a particular house. Grouped together in a common territory, several clusters could make up a *calpolli*.

Marriages within and across group boundaries created as well as helped to maintain confederations of households, subunits, and kingdoms intact. Even in the grandest manifestation of the Aztec empire, its nexus was in large part its bringing of royal daughters from distant altepetl as brides for imperial kings,



with their offspring often becoming rulers in the newly affiliated polity. Aztec kings reportedly had dozens of wives and at least as many children, but such practices were the privilege of the nobility, monogamy being the rule among the Nahua majority.

Indeed, marriage was a key event in the Nahuas' life cycle. Because marriage was considered to be a sacred covenant, brokers representing the families of the prospective bride and groom negotiated on their behalf. Such things as property, residence, and the ceremony itself were doubtless among the topics considered. Once all were in agreement, the bride was secluded and prepared for her marriage. A significant part of the wedding ceremony was the ritual "tying the knot"—literally joining together the bride's blouse or shirt and the groom's cape in a common knot at the shoulder.

The husband's responsibilities included providing for his family—whether by tending to his fields or working as a merchant or an artisan—and, of course, being ready to serve as a warrior when called upon. The wife's duties were just as important, for she had charge of the household, which included nurturing the family, planting and harvesting some crops, maintaining the home, performing certain sacred domestic rituals to foster prosperity, and weaving the textiles to clothe her family, satisfy tribute obligations, and perhaps exchange at the market.

The birth of a child was occasion for celebration and more ceremony. Among the rituals was one of burying the placenta in the dirt floor of the house. In the case of daughters, their umbilical cords were buried adjacent to the hearth. A priest was consulted to divine the baby's future and name her, and there was a presentation of symbolic gender-related tokens as gifts. Baby girls received kits of cooking tools and weaving swords; boys received farm tools, weapons, and other items to ensure success in the battles that likely lay ahead.

Children were cherished among the Nahuas, and most had strict upbringings. Both boys and girls attended school during their formative years. There was a school for commoners and another for children of noble families. Their parents instructed them as to their respective household roles. Females interested in serving as temple priestesses might attend a special school. Education was to ready one for the many responsibilities in life, and noble children especially were to prepare themselves for leadership as rulers, priests, scholars, scientists, jurists, or artists.

The Nahuas' social protocol was such that their language was rich in formulas and modes of eloquent high speech. Males used a special linguistic style to address one another. In their formalized speeches, elders admonished children to practice moderation in all behavior and to be respectful of their superiors. The ideal personality was described as a well-formed "face and heart." During the 15th and 16th centuries, Mexica society was nearly overburdened with well-bred nobles, intellectuals, and other specialists whose influence and contributions were believed critical for the continued well-being of the kingdom.

Mexica society had benefited extraordinarily from the political collaboration of King Itzcoatl and his half-brother Tlacaelel, a wizard of sorts when it came to setting the altepetl on course for greater expansion. Tlacaelel quickly earned the ominous title Cihuacoatl (woman snake), because he helped mastermind the interplay of Mexica theology, economics, and warfare to generate unheard-of wealth and prestige. It was under the joint leadership of Itzcoatl and Tlacaelel Cihuacoatl that the Aztec empire was established. The king and his Cihuacoatl even rewrote history as they launched new, extensive trade networks that brought in not only the supplies needed to sustain the Mexica, with a surplus for redistribution, but also a greater store of luxury items than had been known before.

Access to such resources most often depended on an elite cadre of merchants called *pochteca*, who traveled to both known and unknown territories to gain strategic intelligence and promote trade. Inevitably, warfare became necessary when alien peoples resisted Aztec intrusions. Once conquered (and only a few were able to withstand Aztec warfare over the long term), new subjects were required to furnish tribute in the form of whatever local specialty goods were desired and to provide allocations of young men and women for labor or ritual sacrifice. For example, by the 16th century 16,000 rubber balls from Tlachtepec, near Veracruz, were required annually for games with them in the empire. Otherwise, except for an occasional exaction to support extraordinary imperial events in Mexico Tenochtitlan, apparently little else changed.

One major benefit of the extensive Aztec empire was the development of local and regional markets. Food, crafts, textiles, medicines, exotica, and slaves are only a few of the items available there for sale or exchange. By far the largest and most important market was at Tlatelolco, a co-kingdom of sorts on the island of Mexico Tenochtitlan. Some 50,000 people visited on major market days, and there was such an abundance and variety of items available that magistrates were appointed to guarantee their fair exchange. Currency was most often in the form of lengths of woven cloth or given quantities of cacao beans, which on more than one occasion were discovered to have been counterfeited, with soil or meal substituted for the flesh of the beans.

In addition to enjoying ostentatious displays at the markets, the Aztecs patronized guilds of artists and craftspeople to fashion many of the most precious items into exceptional works of art. The Aztecs likened their style and subject matter to those of Toltec arts, but in truth Aztec artists had as distinctive a style as any of their predecessors. Firsthand accounts by conquerors as well as native survivors attest to an Aztec signature style in the decorative arts. For example, work with feathers from many regions of Mesoamerica was exhibited in exquisite headdresses, shields, fans, and courtly attire, and no doubt feather tapestries and the like decorated palaces, temples, and residences. Other luxuries were finely worked ceramics, mosaics, gold, silver, and copperware, and precious stones, jade and turquoise being among the most coveted.

Almost in deliberate contrast to their delicate fine art was the Aztecs' stone statuary. Great numbers of massive—usually terrifying—images of some of their

more haunting deities were sculpted with nothing but stone tools. Their representation of Coatlicue, Huitzilopochtli's mother, for example, is estimated to weigh as much as 16 tons. These imposing sculptures were then strategically positioned to reaffirm the Aztecs' devotion to their gods. Their street corners, temple plazas, and most other landmarks were adorned with such creations as enormous fanged serpent heads, stone skulls, skeleton figures, and tall, stark human standard-bearers.

Without doubt, the highest Aztec aesthetic expression came in literature and music. Each Nahua *altepetl* had its own literary tradition derived from annals; philosophical, theological, and astronomical treatises; dynastic genealogies; and oral histories. Moreover, it exalted its own heritage and accomplishments to the exclusion of almost everyone else's. *In tlilli in tlapalli* (the black the red) was the Nahuatl metaphor for writing, but in truth their books were filled with brightly colored pictorial images. Recorded on paper made from the bark of a native tree (the *amaquabuitl*, or "paper tree"), the Nahuas stored their precious books, along with maps, tribute records, and other official and personal accounts, in royal libraries.

But notwithstanding their other literary accomplishments, the Aztecs became masters of history and oratory. Among the population at large, the prevailing wisdom of their sages was presumed to supersede that of everyone else. Rulers, priests, scholars, scribes, and artists collaborated to create an Aztec literary canon. Success in war, the installation of a new king on the throne, festivities in honor of a particular deity, and events called for by the ceremonial calendar were all occasions when the books were brought before the public and the privileged information contained therein was revealed. The images in the texts were memorized and, in concert with instrumental music, dancing, and burning incense, the Nahuatl song-liturgies repeatedly brought to life the full pageant of Aztec culture.

By 1428 the long reach of the Mexica and their great prosperity warranted centralizing their operations into a three-way power structure with two other powerful *altepetl*—Tetzaco and Tlacopan, thereby launching what is now referred to as the Aztec Empire. Tlacaehel Cihuacoatl survived Itzcoatl and two of his successors. In league with the additional rulerdoms, the Triple Alliance greatly expanded Aztec territory with its combined military might. In its own way, Aztec warfare must have been a sight to behold, for many warriors joined highly esteemed knightly orders, each with its own special heraldic insignia, banners, costumes, privileges, and protocol in battle. The orders of the eagle and the jaguar knights are thought to have been the most prestigious.

In this period Mexico Tenochtitlan became a showplace. Along with statuary, magnificent palaces and temples were constructed, and elaborated upon by successive rulers. It is estimated that the combined urban area of Tenochtitlan and Tlatelolco was close to 16 square kilometers (6 square miles). By the 16th century, the imperial court was a walled compound enclosing numerous warehouses to store the tribute and plunder from warfare, plus apartments, ball courts, a skull

Moteuczoma Xocoyotl  
(Moctezuma Xocoyotl)  
stands in traditional dress  
before a Romanesque  
landscape in this fanciful  
late 16th- or early 17th-  
century European  
depiction.



rack, palaces for rulers and their families, a zoo, gardens, libraries, tribunals, and an armory. Serving the needs of the Aztecs' court required hundreds of people every day, and its glitter and sumptuousness surpassed all else known in native North America.

Moteuczoma Xocoyotl (popularly called Montezuma), the Aztec emperor fated to negotiate with Hernán Cortés and the Spaniards on behalf of Aztec America, was a ruler without peer. In his intelligence, personal style, and leadership he personified all that was ideal for his time, as well as its traditions. Within his court were the twin temples, or *Templo Mayor*, dedicated to Tlaloc, the rain god, and Huitzilopochtli. The *Templo Mayor* was possibly conceived as the center of the Aztec universe and was thus a sacred, powerful precinct. Archaeologists, art historians, and religion specialists tend to support the interpretation that the *Templo Mayor* was constructed in stages to commemorate Huitzilopochtli's savage creation experience with his mother and sister at Coatepec (Snake Mountain) centuries before. A serpent staircase with a massive grotesque sculpture of a dismembered Coyolxauhqui positioned at its foot, the symbolic details embellishing the temple, the Chacmool, the buried caches of offerings representative of the wealth and expanse of the empire, and a variety of firsthand accounts corroborate the public reputation of the omnipotence of the Aztecs' god. In fact, Tlacaélel and successive Aztec rulers had done much to cultivate the idea that an inexorable Huitzilopochtli controlled their lives.

The Aztecs thus believed that the universe and time were measured by epochs, or suns, and were subject largely to the whimsy of cosmic deities. Four previous suns had ended cataclysmically, and the present, the fifth, would be the last, ending in a violent earthquake. Every 52 years on a given date the Nahuas re-enacted their much-hallowed fire ceremony in anticipation of initiating another calendar cycle. With great reverence and atonement all fires were extinguished. Houses were meticulously cleaned, old items discarded. Then, as night approached, a victim was sacrificed and everyone waited as deity impersonators climbed a mountain south of the capital and, using drills, attempted to kindle a new fire in the gaping chest of the sacrificed person. A flame ensured life for everyone else once again.

Politics still prevailed in the Aztecs' capital, with religion playing a close second. Emperors frequently consulted temple priests to determine propitious times to go to war, as well as to interpret ominous celestial and environmental signs, such as a comet or smoke from the volcanoes. The Aztecs' theologians mandated a collective, all-pervasive religion, with life after death far less a concern than the here and now. Human existence on earth was elusive and transitory, as is reflected in the Aztecs' philosophy and poetry, which often equated life with the blossoming of a beautiful flower that fades and disappears into the earth all too soon.

To be certain that one would have the opportunity to enjoy life at all, it was necessary to follow imperial prescriptions designed to regulate everything from adultery and the consumption of *pulque* (an alcoholic beverage made from the

maguey) to when and against whom war would be waged. An elaborate assortment of ceremonies celebrated a galaxy of deities from the past as well as those assimilated in the course of their conquests, but the most onerous requirement was the sacrifice of a given quantity of humans whose hearts were offered to Huitzilopochtli, the warrior-deity emissary to the sun. The Aztec clergy claimed that from time to time it was necessary to sacrifice a number of humans. Therefore, warfare was frequently followed by sacrifice to satisfy any number of ends. Human sacrifice was also used by emperors to intimidate subject kingdoms. Reportedly, in the late 1480s more than 80,000 men were killed on one such occasion.

By the era of Moteuczoma Xocoyotl (1502–20), Aztec economics, politics, and religion were closely interwoven. But the emperor's authority always prevailed, and when he took to the field in battle or joined his priests at the top of the Templo Mayor and deftly cut out the heart of a war captive, it was as much for political control as it was for the glory of the gods and the enrichment of the state. His orthodoxy was profound, but Moteuczoma Xocoyotl brought into play the cumulative knowledge and practices of his forebears when confronted by circumstances that had no explanation in the Aztecs' sacred texts, such as the strangeness of Spanish ships reconnoitering off Veracruz; the unfamiliarity of horses, vicious dogs, and guns; and the inexplicable violence of the Spaniards themselves.

Aztec protocol demanded diplomacy and negotiation; reciprocal gift giving, including women; propitiation of their deities; and combat. But even many centuries' worth of Mesoamerican tradition was no match for European institutions and technology, to say nothing of the urgency of otherwise very humble Spaniards who felt the necessity of making something of themselves off Aztec spoils. Moteuczoma Xocoyotl's vast empire and the majesty of his metropolis, Mexico Tenochtitlan, were all and more than Cortés and his followers could have ever imagined.

TABLE I  
General Chronology of Mesoamerican Culture Epochs

<i>Classification</i>		
Archaic		c. 1500 B.C.
Preclassic, or Formative	c. 1500 B.C.	c. A.D. 100
Classic		
Central Mexico	c. A.D. 1	c. A.D. 900
Maya	c. A.D. 250	c. A.D. 900–1000
Postclassic		
Central Mexico	c. A.D. 900	c. A.D. 1521
Maya	c. A.D. 900–1000	c. A.D. 1540

TABLE 2  
 Mexica/Aztec Leaders and Kings

<i>Order</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Rule*</i>	<i>Title</i>
1.	Moteucçoma	n.a.	
2.	Chalchiuhtlatonac	n.a.	
3.	Quauhtlequetzqui teomama	1168-1205	<i>teyacanani</i> (leader)
4.	Acacitli	1205-1219	teyacanani
5.	Citlalitzin	1219-1234	teyacanani
6.	Tzinpan	1234-1235	teyacanani
7.	Tlaçotzin	1235-1239	teyacanani
8.	Tozcuecuxtli	1239-1278	teyacanani
9.	Huehue Huitzilihuitl	1278-1299	<i>tlatoani</i> (king) of the Mexica Chichimeca
10.	Tenochtzin	1299-1363	teyacanani, <i>quaubtlatoani</i> (interim ruler)
11.	Acamapichtli	1367-1387 (1376-1396) Tenochtitlan	tlatoani, first king of Mexico
12.	Huitzilihuitl	1391-1415 (1397-1417)	tlatoani
13.	Chimalpopoca (1417-1427)	1415-1426	tlatoani
14.	Itzcoatl	1427-1440	tlatoani
15.	Huehue Moteucçoma Ilhuicamina Chalchiuhtlatonac	1440-1468	tlatoani
16.	Axayacatzin	1469-1481	tlatoani
17.	Tiçoc	1481-1486	tlatoani
18.	Ahuitzotl	1486-1502	tlatoani
19.	Moteucçoma Xocoyotl	1502-1520	<i>huey tlatoani</i> (great king)

\*There is some discrepancy in dates in the various annals. Alternative dates are given in parentheses.  
 Source: Don Domingo de San Antón Muñón Chimalpahin Quauhtlehuanitzin, "The Diario," Bibliothèque Nationale, Fonds Mexicain 220, pp. 72-75, 104-106. See also Elizabeth Hill Boone, *The Aztec World*. Montreal and Washington, D.C.: St. Remy Press and Smithsonian Books, 1994, p. 47.